

JEWISH LIFE IN THE RUSSIAN SATELLITES

The Prospects for Recovery under Totalitarianism

NATHAN REICH

BY NOW the future of two segments of the 1,500,000 European Jews who survived World War II (outside of Russia) can be charted with reasonable accuracy; the fate of the third, those living in the Soviet satellites, still hangs in the balance.

The Jewish communities in Western Europe, we now know, will definitely survive, though, to be sure, there is and will continue to be some individual migration to Israel and other countries. These communities have effected a remarkable social and economic recovery, and the countries in which they live have taken in and provided homes for tens of thousands of Jews fleeing from Eastern Europe. France is likely to become the largest center of Jewish life in Europe.

Just as definitely do we know that Jewish life will not revive in Central Europe. In Germany and Austria, except for insignificant numbers of native Jews, half-Jews, and quarter-Jews, the Jewish population after the war consisted of displaced Jews of Eastern Euro-

pean origin who are now being rapidly evacuated to Israel or prepared for emigration to the United States and other countries. In a few years Central Europe, once the center of a flourishing Jewish life, will become almost as *Judenrein* as Hitler had threatened it would be.

The third and largest portion of European Jewry, the Jews in countries within the Soviet sphere of influence (but outside Russia proper), is now estimated at 670,000. While flight and emigration have reduced their number by more than 200,000 from the 1946 post-war peak, they still represent about 57 per cent of the Jewish population of Europe. Today, four years after liberation, the destiny of the Jews of Eastern Europe is still uncertain. However, especially in recent months, increasingly definite trends make it possible to trace the likely pattern of the future.

How do Jews live today in Poland, Rumania, Hungary, and the other Russian satellite countries—and what is the chance for a continuation of Jewish community life there? It has not been easy to piece together any coherent picture out of the disconnected items of news coming from the countries of Eastern Europe, formerly the homes of the most populous Jewish communities in the world. NATHAN REICH, who was for some years head of the research department of the Joint Distribution Committee, and late in 1947 visited the countries under Russia's influence to observe at first hand the efforts of the remaining Jews to re-establish themselves, here tries to give a coherent, over-all view of current efforts at Jewish rehabilitation in Eastern Europe. Dr. Reich is chairman of the department of economics at Hunter College. He was born in Galicia in 1900, and studied in Prague, at McGill University, the University of Chicago, and at Columbia, where he received his doctoral degree.

IN THE whole Russian-satellite area, several overriding realities have become clearly visible beneath the variant conditions in one country or another. The first and foremost of these realities is the transformed economic and social structure. The combined task of restoring a war-devastated economy and building a collectivist society has imposed an unusually heavy strain upon the whole population; but the Jewish population has perhaps borne the heaviest burden. In Western Europe, where there was no break in the continuity of economic, social, and political institutions, Jews could and did resume where they left off in 1939—with some special difficulties and with outside aid, to be sure. Eastern Europe's Jews, however, are confronted with a completely new environment.

In the early postwar period there were some indications that the satellite countries might be permitted to chart a relatively independent

course and evolve a "mixed" form of economic organization, in which the public sector would be confined to large-scale industry, while medium and small-scale enterprise would continue under cooperative and private management. Recently, however, there has been a swing toward full collectivization of virtually all aspects of economic and social life. The independent entrepreneur in industry and trade is being rapidly eliminated, and only political and tactical considerations prevent, for the time being, the application of similar measures to agriculture.

Whatever the ultimate social and economic merits of a collectivist society, the immediate impact of collectivization upon the lives, livelihood, and social status of large masses of Jews was bound to be little short of shattering. To be sure, a collectivist society offers opportunities of its own; it usually requires a larger industrial labor force and offers the former merchants and entrepreneurs the opportunity of becoming members of a growing "proletariat." And proletarian status in a collectivized society has its advantages, too—though they are best discerned when viewed from the comfortably distant vantage-point of a sympathetic outside observer. To the immediate subject of the collectivistic experiment, however, the process of compulsory proletarianization is much less attractive; it involves a loss of economic position, of traditional skill, of income, and of social status—the last of great importance in the highly coordinated and ideologically charged atmosphere of a "collectivist society."

A SECOND factor of perhaps greater importance militating against Jewish readjustment in Eastern Europe is the tragic experience of the war years, combined with the continuing deep-seated anti-Semitism of uncomfortably large sections of the inhabitants. The reigning ideology demands a policy of complete racial and ethnic equality, and the new constitutions have made this a basic law. Within the limits of public power, the governments, particularly at their top levels, endeavor to enforce this policy. The powers of governments, however, cannot enforce full

compliance at all levels of administration in the face of widespread antagonism, and most certainly cannot impose a pattern of behavior upon the whole population and prevent those innumerable indirect, extra-legal manifestations which continue to disturb and frighten Jews. And when we consider that the governments themselves are not the free choice of the people, and bear the stamp of a foreign power, we can understand their reluctance to add to the fuel of the opposition by showing excessive zeal in defending the interests of the Jews.

This has become particularly apparent in the halting and equivocal manner in which these governments have acted in the matter of property restitution. The original restitution laws were already riddled with significant exceptions in favor of the new owners of former Jewish property. Their effectiveness was further whittled down by half-hearted and dilatory efforts at enforcement. In some instances, as in Czechoslovakia, mob pressures prevented the enforcement of court rulings.

Except for Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe has had a long history. It was immensely strengthened during the occupation years, not only by systematic Nazi propaganda, but by the vivid demonstration that Jews could be tortured and slaughtered and Jewish goods stolen with impunity. It continues during the postwar years, nourished by general discontent over hard times, by social and political friction engendered by the suppression of all opposition, and by the general tension which prevails in times of drastic shifts of political and economic power.

Nor are matters improved by the fact that individual Jews occupy leading governmental positions, particularly in Poland, Hungary, and Rumania. Though everyone knows that tens of thousands of Jews have been ruined by the nationalization of industry and trade, and that, given the opportunity, tens of thousands would flee to other lands, these facts do not outweigh the presence of Hilary Minc as the Minister of Industry in Poland, Vice Premier Matyas Rakosi as the power behind the throne in Hungary, and Ana Pauker as the fore-

most agent of Cominform Policy in Rumania.

The extent and depth of postwar anti-Semitism may be gauged by the fact that in the summer of 1947, more than two years after liberation, Jews and non-Jews pointed to the free unmolested movement of Jews on the highways of Poland as a great accomplishment. And so it was, when viewed against the background of frequent murder of Jews in 1945 and 1946. Today, although sporadic instances of mob violence still occur—recently the Jewish Hospital in Bratislava, Slovakia, one of the best in the country, was damaged—the physical security of the Jewish population in all the countries of Eastern Europe is generally assured. Physical security, however, is hardly enough, and the atmosphere of tension is frequently enough to tip the scales in favor of emigration.

STILL another factor favors emigration. The Jews in the East have family ties and cultural associations with Israel and the West. There is hardly a family without relatives in Israel, or in the United States and other Western countries, and the urge to join relatives has become a most powerful drive among the surviving Jews, most of whom have lost the bulk of their families in the cataclysm of war. The most poignant impression one brings home from a visit to the pitifully shrunken Jewish communities in Eastern Europe is of their utter loneliness, their feeling of isolation, and the ever-present irrepressible hunger to find emotional security in the midst of the more fortunately situated branches of families in Israel and the West.

This loneliness is also of the spirit. All aspects of Jewish life are being rapidly "coordinated" to fit into the pattern of the monolithic state and arid culture forged in Russia. The general cultural spirit is secularistic and, paradoxically enough, nationalistic, that is, unfriendly to genuine ethnic and cultural diversity. Jewish organizations are "enthusiastically" dissolving themselves. Those who resist suicide and refuse to attend their own funerals are pressured into amalgamation with central Communist-dominated Jewish organizations, and the most ruthless pressure is

applied to organizations with Western affiliations, from the socialistically militant Bund in Poland to B'nai B'rith lodges, now declared to harbor "imperialist reactionaries," in Bulgaria. Recently, the policy of isolating East European Jews from the West has been extended to bring under attack pure welfare and relief organizations. At the beginning of March, the Rumanian government closed the offices of the JDC, the OSE, and the ORT.

It is true that minorities are granted "autonomous" rights. Jews in Poland are permitted to maintain schools with Yiddish as the language of instruction; the schools are now financed largely by funds of the JDC, but a promise has been given that they will soon become a charge of the public budget. There are also Jewish schools in Rumania, and one finds Yiddish theaters, publications, and Jewish cultural organizations in Poland and Rumania. This "autonomy," however, is purely linguistic: one is free to praise the regime and serve its dominant ideals in Yiddish—but praise and conform one must. It is an autonomy of form and not of substance. Religious activities are permitted, but the general atmosphere—in conformity with the tenets of Marxism—is unfriendly to religious expression. Official attitudes toward Israel have been friendly in international tribunals, but Zionists at home have recently found the road increasingly harder; the old Soviet canard of identifying Zionism with Anglo-American imperialism has again been dusted off, and is being used in an intense campaign against Zionism and emigration.

Thus all Jews—the religious, the Zionist, the nationalistically and culturally minded—except only the small group of convinced Communists—feel increasingly isolated from the large Jewish communities in Israel, the United States, and other Western countries. For this the political "alliance" with the approximately 1,800,000 Jews in the Soviet Union is little compensation; for the Jews of Eastern Europe remain cut off from the Jews in Russia, and the Russian Jews themselves are in an advanced stage of religious and cultural anemia.

All this adds up to a general uneasiness

that is reflected vividly, not only in the widespread desire to emigrate but in the present substantial rate of actual emigration. There is, of course, no way to measure the strength of the urge to leave. But we may recall Lenin's famous image of the Russian soldiers voting against World War I with their feet. Jews in Eastern Europe are also voting with their feet: when given the chance, they leave in droves. The proportion of potential émigrés is probably at least one-half the Jewish population.

The establishment of Israel gave renewed impetus to the movement of emigration, which in the cases of Bulgaria and Yugoslavia became a full-fledged exodus. Within the past three or four months almost three-fourths of the 45,000 Bulgarian Jews and one-half of the 11,000 Yugoslav Jews have departed for Israel. Although the ceremonies held at the departure of emigrants dutifully end with thanks and toasts to Stalin and local Communist dignitaries, the zeal to exchange the new peoples' democracies for the "imperialistic" outside world is unmistakable. During 1948, sizable groups of Jews left Rumania, and plans were set afoot arranging for substantial emigration from both Czechoslovakia and Hungary.

HOWEVER, any prospect of a quick solution via emigration to East European Jewry's ordeal has in recent months disappeared as one satellite country after another has put onerous restrictions on emigration. (This is in marked contrast to 1948, when no obstacles were placed on large-scale movement to Israel.) In Rumania particularly, efforts to leave have become very hazardous. The *Jewish Morning Journal* of March 9 reported that two young Jews, who had been training at a Halutz farm in preparation for life in Israel, had been shot to death while trying to cross the Rumanian border into Hungary. At the beginning of March, the Hungarian government disavowed the reports that it was negotiating a far-reaching immigration agreement with Israel. Accordingly, many Jews are today endeavoring to adjust to their new circumstances, on the assumption that it may be a long, long time before

they can get out. Reconstructing their lives as best they can on their native soil, they have restored a semblance of communal life, and wherever possible have established synagogues, schools, and other cultural institutions, in the face of the discouraging environment we have described.

The process of economic recovery has gone farthest in Poland, where virtually every able-bodied adult Jew willing to work has been able to find a place in the new economy. The income of the gainfully employed is low and leaves little margin for the support of orphan children, invalids, the sick, schools, and religious institutions, so the Jewish community is not as yet self-supporting. Economic conditions, however, are gradually improving, and Polish Jewry is gradually freeing itself from the necessity of relying on foreign relief to carry on its welfare and communal responsibilities.

Indeed, the economic rehabilitation of Polish Jewry forms a really remarkable chapter of postwar Jewish history. Fewer than 40,000 Jews emerged from the forests and hiding-places when the Germans were finally driven from Poland. From 20,000 to 30,000 more returned from the labor camps of Germany and Austria, and in the spring of 1946, 150,000 more appeared, the hardy survivors of some 350,000 Jews who had fled or had been deported to the Soviet Union. The Jewish population of Poland reached a peak of about 220,000 in the summer of 1946. Then, in July, came the Kielce progrom, in which 41 Jews were massacred in broad daylight, and over 120,000 Jews fled in panic to the security of the American Zone in Germany. Today there are about 85,000 Jews in Poland, a little more than two per cent of the pre-war population.

The Jews of Poland had nothing left and returned to nothing. They were completely uprooted, social atoms without home or property or—in most cases—family. Their conditions were far worse than in any of the surrounding countries. In those early days after the war, few saw any hope for the reestablishment of Jewish life in Poland, and Dr. Joseph J. Schwartz of the JDC, among the first

Americans to visit Poland in 1945, reported that Polish Jews were "sitting on their valises," waiting to get out.

Yet, as it turned out, it was just this absolute ruin and destitution that made it possible for Polish Jews to stage the strongest economic comeback of any Jewish community in Eastern Europe. Adjustment to the new conditions that prevailed in Eastern Europe required a drastic break with the past: with no past left, Polish Jewry could only enter on a completely new path.

So we find that, while private trade was still widespread in post-liberation Poland, barely 7 or 8 per cent of the remaining Jews returned to private trade. Jews have set themselves up as craftsmen, have secured employment in state enterprises, and, most significantly, have developed a network of more than two hundred producers cooperatives, supported by JDC funds and aided and assisted by the government. (This occupational shift, of course, was also made possible by the fact that it was those who had skills who had the best chance to survive in the German labor camps and under the rigorous conditions of wartime Russia.) These producers cooperatives, some of which have served as a model of organization for the entire country, produced goods (clothing, leather goods, shoes, carpentry, metal-work) worth four billion zlotys (\$10,000,000) in 1948, and will produce more in 1949. They have six thousand members, who earn a more than average income, and who, with dependents, make up close to one-fifth of the Jewish population.

An additional factor favoring economic recovery was the fact that Poland had taken over from Germany important territories, and had summarily ejected the German inhabitants. Here were these empty lands, with empty homes and unworked industrial premises, which the Polish government was anxious to fill again as soon as possible with an industrious and hard-working population. The settlement of Jews was encouraged in the new lands, and over one-half of remaining Polish Jewry took up life again in Silesia. There was also an important psychological

factor on the new frontier: all the newcomers, Jews and Poles, were on the same level. The Jews did not have the difficult task of re-establishing themselves among a settled, sullen, and resentful populace. With elbow-room enough for everybody, there was much less tension between Jews and Poles in the new territories than in the old Poland.

WHEN we turn to Hungary, we see quite a different picture. The 170,000 Jews remaining in Hungary have claimed a higher proportion of JDC funds than those of any other European country, outside of the countries with DP camps. As a by-product of their frightful ordeal, the surviving Polish Jews showed a favorable age and occupational distribution—favorable, that is, for purposes of economic reconstruction. Hungarian Jews, on the other hand, show a very high proportion of aged, and a very small proportion of persons who can find gainful employment in the "new Hungary." We find that 50 per cent of the surviving Jews are over thirty-four, 18 per cent are over sixty, and that 66 percent of the Jewish population over forty-five are women, most of whom are unemployable. The majority of the Jewish survivors are inhabitants of Budapest, and include only an insignificant proportion of craftsmen and industrial workers.

The Jews of Hungary, encouraged by the overwhelmingly anti-Communist sentiment of the country and the non-Communist complexion of the early postwar governments, believed with the rest of the Hungarians that there would be some kind of return to "normalcy." They expected that the country would soon settle down with some kind of left-of-center government presiding over an economy in which only large-scale industry and banking would be nationalized. Overwhelmingly middle class and not so thoroughly uprooted, as compared with Polish Jews, they strongly resisted "proletarianization," and attempted to return to their pre-war activities. Their limited success in this direction is now being swept away altogether as the country moves toward complete collectivization.

Of an employable population of roughly

70,000, some 25 or 35 thousand draw an uncertain livelihood from small-scale trading, 10,000 are employed in state enterprises and offices, and the remaining 30,000 live on the periphery of the economy: on relief, or on a small income from peddling and other submarginal pursuits. If Hungarian Jews are to be integrated into the new Hungarian economy, about one-half of the population will require training in some occupation. The government has launched a program of industrial expansion that will require 300,000 industrial workers: but these will be drawn primarily from the agricultural population.

The best solution—barring as we must the possibility of imminent emigration—would seem to be a vigorous development of producers cooperatives, on the Polish model. These would serve the dual function of supplying tools, materials, and orders to Jewish craftsmen, and providing training facilities to those without skills. The JDC has started such a program of cooperatives, and at the moment ten, with a membership of 400 persons, are in operation. The success of this enterprise depends on the general course of economic recovery in Hungary, the extent of government assistance, and the response from the Hungarian Jews. The relative weakness of Zionism among the Hungarian Jews before the war and the limited prospects for emigration suggest that Hungarian Jewry will try to make an effort to find some place for itself in the new order.

THE Rumanian problem is essentially the same, except that there are twice as many Jews in Rumania as in Hungary—350,000, or some 50,000 less than in 1947. Two facts explain the high number surviving: the core of the Jewish community—the 250,000 Jews of Old Rumania—was spared the ordeal of deportation; and the others, the Jews from the provinces acquired by Rumania after 1918, were sent to forced labor in the Rumanian-occupied sections of the Ukraine, rather than to extermination camps; many of them returned after the war. Moreover, the Jews in Old Rumania were not left as destitute materially as the Jews of Poland or Hungary:

following the liberation, many of them succeeded in salvaging the property they had disposed of at panic prices to their non-Jewish neighbors, and many others got some kind of economic foothold. Until the summer of 1947, the economy was "free," and, with JDC assistance, the net of pre-war credit cooperatives was revived and thousands of small merchants and craftsmen were helped to get started. By the summer of 1947, about one-half of Rumanian Jewry was economically self-supporting and even contributing to the support of communal and religious institutions. The other half led a precarious existence on the fringes of the economy, depending on casual earnings, relatives in Rumania and abroad, and JDC relief.

The drive toward complete nationalization of industry and trade that began in the summer of 1947 gave a sharp jolt to this partial recovery of Rumanian Jewry. Small-scale private trade still enjoys legal existence but is being rapidly hemmed in by government enterprise. While the credit cooperatives were exempted from the sweeping decree nationalizing banking, their operations were limited to craftsmen and employes, and the private traders and small entrepreneurs who had made up half of their membership were excluded. Unable to obtain credit, without raw materials and merchandise, facing government competition, the small business men are rapidly joining the ranks of the *déclassé*. Nationalization is increasing unemployment in yet another way. While industry was in private hands, it was practically impossible to legally fire an employe; these legal restrictions have now been lifted in the interests of the greater efficiency of government enterprise.

Forty to fifty thousand Rumanian Jews will have to be retrained to fit them into the new socio-economic structure, and the JDC and ORT are sponsoring a program of vocational retraining, and here too resort has been had to the form of producers cooperatives. But the task is too vast to be shouldered by any private agency. Moreover, the recent closing of the offices of these agencies by the Rumanian government has injected a new ele-

ment of uncertainty. Only a comprehensive plan backed by government resources could solve a problem of this magnitude. But the country is poor, its economic leadership inept, and the Jewish community is torn by internal struggles and is without accepted leadership. The Communist-dominated Jewish Democratic Committee, which has usurped the political control of the Jewish community, has launched a bitter attack on the Zionist elements of Rumanian Jewry, which has already led to the dissolution of many Zionist organizations, and the closing of one hundred centers training youth for life in Israel. Meanwhile, the economic deterioration of Rumanian Jewry continues, with no hope of halting it in sight. The strong sentiment for emigration adds to the general uncertainty and weakens any drive toward local economic rehabilitation.

POLAND, Hungary, and Rumania account for 90 per cent of the Jews of Eastern Europe, and the remaining 10 per cent are distributed among Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. There are 40,000 Jews in Czechoslovakia, mostly in Slovakia. Here the story parallels Rumania: considerable strides toward economic self-sufficiency were made in the first three postwar years, but the Communist seizure of power in January 1948 produced new uncertainties and strengthened the urge to emigrate; perhaps 20,000 Jews, it has been estimated, will leave Czechoslovakia in the near future.

In Bulgaria and Yugoslavia, the Jewish communities are in a state of virtual liquidation. Bulgaria has been singularly free from anti-Semitism, and Bulgarian Jewry was the only Jewish community in the Nazi sphere of domination which emerged from the war physically intact. This was not out of any softening on the part of the Nazis: the Bulgarian government, as well as the Bulgarian people, withstood their demands that the Jews be deported. Yet Bulgarian Jews are leaving en masse. To what extent this emigration is due to the pull of Israel and to what extent it stems from opposition to the new collectivist order it is hard to say.

THE postwar economic and social scene of Eastern Europe does not, then, inspire much faith in any substantial future for Jewish life there. But even with continued emigration, several hundred thousand Jews will remain in that area, and they will have to make the best possible adjustment to the new conditions. Barring new wars or other drastic upheavals, there should be little fear concerning their physical security and physical survival; and the ultimate integration of able-bodied Jews into the new economic order is also quite certain, slow and painful though the process may be. However, the survival of an organized and freely functioning Jewish community life can hardly be expected. The irresistible pressure toward totalitarian coordination now in full swing in the countries of Eastern Europe, and the experience of the culturally atomized Jewish community in the Soviet Union both argue against the assumption of continued Jewish life, in anything except the physical sense, in that region.

This means that Jewish life, as we in the West continue to know it, and as it has been formed by an age-old tradition and history, may well be doomed in the countries of Eastern Europe. Physically the Jews who remain will survive; but their independent institutions will be destroyed, and those "Jewish" institutions that will be allowed to remain will be nothing but arms of the government. Carrying on the Jewish heritage in any vital or identifiable way under such circumstances would seem to be precluded.

Yet it seems to me that as long as aid is permitted to reach the Jews in Eastern Europe, American Jews will wish to continue to send this aid. Emigration to lands where Jewish life can exist should, it goes without saying, have top priority: but after that should come measures of local economic rehabilitation. These are essential, whether the Jews leave or stay. If they stay, they will have to learn new trades, will have to gain their livelihood as workers; otherwise they remain completely destitute and in misery. If they manage to get out, their acquired skills and trades will aid their adjustment in countries of their choice.